



How do we communicate and work with data in creative organizations?

- About A Suitcase of Methods' final workshop



By Nina Gram

A Suitcase of Methods is reaching its final phase. In the previous [report #17](#), I summed up what we have done and what we have learned in the project. Now it is time to explore how these results can be communicated and give value to cultural institutions and others working with an audience.

Vi valgte at afslutte projektet med en workshop, som fandt sted i juni 2019. Vi brugte denne lejlighed og dette workshopformat til dels at opsummere og præsentere vores resultater men også til at stille og undersøge to afsluttende spørgsmål:

We chose to round off A Suitcase of Methods with a workshop, which took place in June 2019. Aside from using this occasion to present our results, we also used this opportunity to ask and explore two final questions regarding audiences and qualitative data:

- How can we best communicate our findings in A Suitcase of Methods?
And in continuation of this:
- What does it take, for creative organizations to be able to implement knowledge about audiences, and ensure that this knowledge is of value to the organization?

I have often seen interesting and detailed reports on cultural issues, which are never fully applied and ingrained in the organizations. For that reason, I wanted to end the project by testing a different communication tool – An approach that appealed to both our intellect and our senses and bodies. The result was a sensory version of a report. A guided tour of the theatre as well as a tour of the findings of A Suitcase of Methods. It was a combination of a traditional aural presentation and some more sensory and inspirational inputs that supported and communicated these same results in a different way.



Shane Brox, a designer and creative, who previously worked on a production at The Royal Danish Theatre, helped design the tour and was responsible for the creative elements. We invited eight participants for the workshop. Each of them worked in different and interesting ways with audiences. The participant were:

- Marianne Klint, Director, Momentum Theater
- Kasper Holten, CEO, The Royal Danish Theatre.
- Tim Matiakis, Artistic Director, Corpus, contemporary dance company
- Mette Wolf, CEO, Nørrebro Theater
- Lene Heiselberg, Associated researcher, Danish Broadcasting's media research department.
- Morten Krogh, Festival Director, CPH Stage
- Lene Struck-Madsen, Project manager, Applaus
- Christina Østerby, Chief Executive, Gyldendal's book club and Gyldendal+.

We wanted the experiences and insights from the workshop to be available to as many people as possible. We thus filmed the entire day with the purpose of easily communicating both our findings in A Suitcase of Methods but also our results from this different way of communicating these same findings.

[Watch the film](#)

It's all about relationship and vulnerability

As I wrote about in report #17, some of our studies include findings and themes that are general and fundamental for the entire project. These themes are:

- The effect of the space
How does the space affect the conversation we have with the audience?
Find our report about the impact of the space during audience conversations [here](#).
- The effect of the questions
Which questions are most efficient in order to have relevant conversations with audiences?
What happens for instance when we take our physical experience with the art as point of departure for the conversation? Find the report "Where in your body..." [here](#).
- The effect of open rehearsals and insights into the work in progress of the theatre
What happens when we invite audiences to open rehearsals and talk to them afterwards?
What effect do these open, imperfect processes have on the relationships we establish with the audience and the feedback they give us afterwards? Read more [here](#).



We talked about these themes in the workshop, along with two specific values, which we found (from our work with the various studies) to be fundamental for the work with the audience. These values are *relationship* and *vulnerability*. Both the themes and the values were incorporated as subtle, physical elements on the guided tour and thus communicated on different levels to the participants.¹

What did we do?

How did we work with the impact of different spaces?

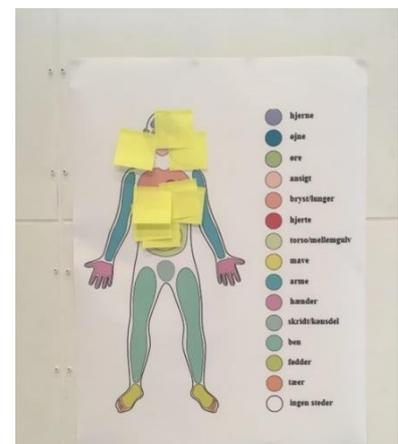
We learned from our various projects and studies in A Suitcase of Methods that the space in which we meet with and talk to the audience is of great importance. It affects the connection we have with them and thus the quality of the data, we can take away from the situation. We therefore wanted to work consciously with the spaces in the guided tour and make sure that the participants experienced the atmosphere of various spaces. We started out in a somewhat anonymous and uninspiring space, seen on the picture. This is usually a space we pass through in the theatre and we occasionally use it for brief, informal meetings. Here we welcomed the group and informed them of the plans for the day.



First stop of the day, the corridor at The Royal Danish Theatre's Old Stage

How did we incorporate the physical experience of the art?

We then moved into a space with more meaning and tradition imbedded into the atmosphere – a dance rehearsal space. Here we showed a short film about a project we did in collaboration with the dance company Corpus and the performance *One One One* (find the film [here](#)). We wanted to show the responses we get when talking to audiences about their experience. Furthermore, we used the film in the workshop to give the participants a common experience, so we afterwards could ask them: "Where in your body did you feel your experience with the film?" We asked them to put a post-it on the body part, in which they felt the experience, and the picture on the



The participants' response to the exercise 'Where in your body..?'

¹ Read more about both the themes and the values in [report #17](#).



right shows the results. This was a way of physically exemplifying one of the projects in A Suitcase of Methods. Read more about the original survey [here](#).

From here we moved through the back stage area out on stage. The stage is a space, with a very strong tradition and aesthetic, which might be impressive or even intimidating for some of the participant. Here I did a brief aural presentation of a few central projects in A Suitcase of Methods.²



Presenting our findings on stage

How did we work with open rehearsals in the workshop?

After the presentation the group once again was led through the narrow corridors of the theatre to the next stop on the tour - another dance rehearsal space. Here we witnessed a couple of minutes of the rehearsal for a ballet performance for and including children.



Open rehearsals. Ballet students working on a coming performance

The open rehearsals were a fundamental element in our findings in A Suitcase of Methods. We therefore wanted the workshop participants experience the qualities of this specific generous setup as well. Because the open rehearsals both point at and represent part of a solution to a current challenge, that many cultural institutions face today: Finding the difficult balance of the *excellent* and the *inviting* - between being a house presenting the most excellent art experiences and being an inviting venue. As cultural institutions we should present art of the highest possible quality, and at the same time we need to make our visitors feel welcome and feel like they are capable of taking on (and taking in) an art experience. The open rehearsals are a way of finding this balance. Because when we open our doors to the unfinished, imperfect process and dare to be vulnerable in that way, it is easier for the audience to relate to us. When we show the work in progress, we inherently invite the audience to be imperfect and honest in their response to us. The open rehearsal during the workshop represented this vulnerability, as it was both moving, beautiful and vulnerable to see the dedicated young ballet students at work.

The next stop once again pointed out the qualities of getting access to everything going on behind the stage. Here we went through the theatre tailors' charming and beautiful department with costumes hanging

² Read more about these selected projects in [report #17](#).



everywhere. Shane Brox explained how he has tremendous respect for the craftsmanship involved in making these costumes. Learning about the crafts of the theatre makes him even more impressed by the results and more invested in the theatre. We wanted the participants to hear this argument as they were placed precisely in the middle of tutus and high hats.



On our way into the men's tailors department

On our way to the final stop of the day, we went through one last rehearsal room, where the smallest ballet students were working on their own choreography. A secret door hidden behind a mirror led us to the theatre's attic, where a table with crémant and delicate snacks was waiting creating an inspirational setting for the discussion.

By this time the participants had passed through many different spaces in the theatre. Some were practical work spaces and others were more aesthetically appealing. We did this as mentioned because we wanted to illustrate how the various atmospheres affect us, affect the way we receive knowledge and input, and affect the way we relate to each other.

We chose to end the tour in the attic because this specific space was something in between the designed beautiful spaces and the more neutral work spaces. Up here (placed at a distance from the art but still in the theatre), we were able to reflect on both the art on stage, the audience, and the institution as a whole.

I started the discussion by explaining why A Suitcase of Methods saw *relationship* and *vulnerability* as core values when it comes to working qualitatively with audience data, and also how these terms can be fundamental for the future work of implementing data about audiences in creative organizations. After this the participants were invited to reflect on these values and on their experiences with working with audience data in general.



The attic at The Royal Danish Theatre's Old Stage. The scene is set for the discussion.



What did we learn from the discussion?

The day ended in a good, long, and honest discussion, which primarily revolved around the challenges we face when working with data and trying to implement it in cultural institutions. One of the major challenges was how we can use audience feedback during the rehearsal process. Theatre is an art form where the final expression comes together very close to the premiere. It is therefore difficult to ask an audience to give feedback on something that is far from finished.³ We never solved this problem, but it would be interesting, if we were to take this challenge seriously and start to experiment with the rehearsal format to see, if there were any way specific elements of the performance could be tested earlier in the process.



The discussion also focused on how we implement data in creative organizations. This perspective led to reflections on what level of influence data should have in these organizations. It was clear that no one thinks data should dictate artistic decisions. Instead it should qualify the intuition of the employees and decision makers in the theatre.

In addition to this, the quality of qualitative methods was emphasized. The numbers and graphs of the quantitative data can sometimes be challenging to translate into practices related to the artistic process and the theatre in general. However, the cases and personal experiences of the qualitative data involve a discourse and language that can more easily be communicated in the organization.

Finally we heard from the artistic director for Corpus, Tim Matiakis, how it can be challenging for an artist to receive feedback from the audience. Matiakis described how it takes courage and practice to stay open and curious to learn more about how the art you produced is received.

³ The way open rehearsals work now, is that audiences watch the performance approximately a week before the premiere, which gives them a good idea of the final product, and it still leaves time for very small, practical corrections to be made.



Qualities of this sensory communication model

As I described in the beginning of the report, this different communication model (the workshop in combination with the film) was in itself a way of exploring how best to communicate data about audiences to creative organizations. Now it is time to reflect on the experienced qualities and limitations of the method. The film, however, is only just finished, so we haven't tested it as a communication tool yet.

The workshop itself went well, and the response from the participants was that it was interesting to experience the theatre in this different way. It was my impression that the workshop succeeded in surprising and inspiring the participants, making them actively relate to the information, we presented to them. I am also pleased with the final discussion and the fact that every participant generously shared their thoughts and reactions. I heard from one of them that the quality of this type of workshop takes a couple of days to manifest itself. As though it made more and more sense as the days went by.

Another quality is that this way of coming together as a group makes it obvious, how the theatre business has developed over the past couple of days. We are ready to work together and learn from each other in a way that I haven't seen before. That is truly encouraging.

Limitations of this communication model

The most obvious limitations of workshop understood as a communication model is the limited number of participants. We chose to invite eight participants to ensure that we could create an atmosphere where everyone could feel safe to share their challenges and success within this field. I am happy about how this turned out, and about the connection I felt in the group on that day. However, there are many individuals, who I would have been interesting to invite along, who we unfortunately didn't have space to include.

The workshop understood as a communication tool thus makes most sense in combination with the film, and all of our material on A Suitcase of Methods' blog.

Furthermore, I am left with thoughts on the level and amount of information we presented to the group. The participants were given a lot of aural information (what did we do and what did we learn in a Suitcase) while being stimulated and entertained in different situations and by different inputs (films, open rehearsals etc.). Right after these inputs we asked them to reflect on what they just experience and relate it to their own work. That is a lot! In my opinion, the participants did this very well, but I am still left with the sense that some of the insights from the project and the intention with the workshop could have been more clearly communicated.

Throughout all of our work with A Suitcase of Methods, we have seen how complex and difficult it is to focus on the method with which we collect data and on how this work can be of value to cultural institutions. For obvious reasons we often tend to focus on the most urgent challenges such as how we can reach a new audience etc. In terms of the workshop, this meant that we ended up talking a lot about (real and relevant) limitations of the theatre as an art and as a business. This is natural and understandable. However, it leaves me with a small wish. I wish we would have dared to lift ourselves up from the practicalities of our everyday work life and work



challenges, and (with the inspiration from the tour) would have dared to dream and make (perhaps not entirely realistic) plans for how cultural institutions in the future should relate to their audience. We got there momentarily, and for that I am grateful.

Finally I would like to thank all the participants of the workshop, and now I look forward to testing the [film](#) as part of a more traditional aural presentation. So if you and your organization would like to hear more about what we have done and what we have learned in A Suitcase of Methods feel free to contact me, Nina Gram, at nigr@kglteater.dk.